

# Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Vayeshev 5785

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Yosef's master angrily puts Yosef in the king's dungeon.

וַיִּקַּח אֲדֹנָי יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ אֶל־בַּיִת הַסֵּהַר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־[אֲסִירֵי] (אסורי) הַמֶּלֶךְ  
אֲסִירִים וַיְהִי־שָׁם בְּבַיִת הַסֵּהַר:

“And Yosef's master took [sold] him, and he gave him to the House of Detention, a place that the king binds the bound, and he was there in the House of Detention.” (Bereishis 39:20).

Was Yosef a prisoner? Why did his master “give” him away? Why was it important that he was in the king's dungeon? Why did his master put Yosef there?

The entire Perek 39 is one long parsha. It is sandwiched between a closed break {ס} and an open break {פ}. This means it is helpful to read it together to gain context to know exactly what happened. Did Yosef do something to deserve being put in a dungeon? For the most part, being thrown in a dungeon was for one of two reasons. First, to await trial of a hanging or other execution. Later on, in this week's parsha, the Lord Baker and Lord Cupbearer were both thrown in the dungeon for that reason, awaiting their trials. Second, it was to be there for life without hope of ever seeing freedom. This was for minor crimes that did not warrant immediate punishment like the removing of a hand.

The parsha introduces Yosef as indispensable. The traders brought him down to Mitzrayim and Potiphar, the Lord Butcher, acquired him. The word there is וַיִּקְנֵהוּ. That word is used when one acquires another possession for a favorable price – without bargaining. Adam uses the term when he calls his son Cain. “I acquired a man from Hashem.” (Bereishis 4:1). When Melchizedek blessed Avraham, he called Hashem “He who acquired Heaven and Earth.” (Ibid 14:19). Avraham uses that same phrase. (Ibid 14:22). Although it initially says Avraham took (kach) the field, (ibid 23:13), it later writes “the field that he acquired.” (Ibid 25:10). Take is a bargain. Acquire is when the trading partners are unequal. Hashem Created the Heavens and Earth, so clearly “acquiring them” was not a bargain. Adam did not do anything much to deserve another son, he produced one – free. Avraham got the better of the deal from Efron, because land in Eretz Yisroel is priceless. As the Lord Butcher, Yosef was sold to him at a favorable price. It also means that no matter what Yosef was sold for, Yosef was so talented that any price he was a bargain.

Hashem was with Yosef in all he did. (Ibid 39:2). His master soon elevated him to a position of power, to the steward of his entire household. (Ibid 39:4). It was not just a household. It was the household of a courtesan and the Lord Butcher of the land. Interestingly, Egypt at the time was vegetarian. We see this from historical record, but also later pesukim that say Egyptians despised shepherds and those who ate meat. Thus, he was either the Lord of the Kitchen, but more likely, head of the king's bodyguards.

This was an important man with important political business dealings. Yosef was involved in all of it—from the shadows and obscurity. The household and business thrived. (Ibid 39:5). It got to a point where Potiphar left everything to Yosef and concerned himself with none of it. He saw he had good meals, bread always on his plate, so he knew he was doing well. (Ibid 39:6). The Torah constantly refers to bread meals as feasts. The feast after the great war (ibid 14:18); the feast given to the messengers (ibid 18:5); the feast Yaakov gave to Esav to entice the sale (ibid 25:34); the feast the brothers sat to after destroying Shechem and avenging their sister (ibid 37:25); and the feast Yosef served his brothers after he revealed himself to them (ibid 43:31).

Times then got difficult. His master's wife laid eyes on him and he had to refuse her many times. (Ibid 39:8). He even pled with her not to breach the trust of her husband. (Ibid 39:10). One time she gained an upper hand when the house was empty. (Ibid 39:11). She took his cloak and showed it as proof of his wrongdoing. (Ibid 39:16). The word she used, though, with her husband is קָנַח. Often mistranslated as "laugh" or "be merry" it really means to celebrate good news or good fortune. When Avraham heard the news, he would have a son through Sarah, he celebrated. (Ibid 17:17). Sarah celebrated, too, despite knowing their obvious physical obstacles. (Ibid 18:12). Lot's sons-in-law thought Lot was drunk when he relayed the news about Sodom's future — as if he were in celebration. (Ibid 19:14). Sarah says that Hashem gave her reason to celebrate and all will celebrate with her. (Ibid 21:6). Sarah was daunted and upset that Yishmael should celebrate his position as eldest son even with Yitzchok being born. (Ibid 26:8). Yitzchok and Rivkah were caught celebrating their good fortune that she was no longer an Akara. (Ibid 226:8). When Bnei Yisroel made a feast for their new Molten Calf, they celebrated. (Shmos 32:6).

The wife of Potiphar was saying that Yosef was trying to steal from him. She accused him of celebrating their wealth and success together. The only thing they would celebrate would be Yosef becoming a freeman. Potiphar trusted Yosef fully. He left him alone at home in care of all his business. He did not care so long as he saw the wealth pour in. However, hearing that Yosef would celebrate, that his wife may make Yosef a freeman, and Yosef would take his success and the wealth with him, angered the master. (Ibid 39:19). Therefore, he sold him to the House of Detention. He did not imprison Yosef in the dungeon. He sold him to the king to be put there to work the detention center. Dungeons were also political businesses. They would charge for every inmate and would take bribes from inmate families. Potiphar, at least, got his money's worth from Yosef. He sold Yosef for a fair price. Soon, the warden found that Yosef was excellent at his job and he made the dungeons of the king even more successful. He made his new masters rich.

As our pasuk says, "he sold him and gave him to the detention center." He was sold there. It could be "sold" as a prisoner. However, it was "a place that the king confines the confined." He was sold to there, but not to be confined. Just to a place that confines others. So why was he sold? "And he was there in the House of Detention." He was there, a slave working for the warden, but not as a confined inmate.

This distinction is important, because it explains the motives Yosef had in asking the Lord Cupbearer for help. It also explains his condition and whether he had hope of ever being a freeman again and seeing his dreams come true.